

Rethinking Biblical hermeneutics for mobilizing Christian believers to proclaim the Good News in a post-secular age

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Abstract

The continuous changing of the *zeitgeist*, from modernism through postmodernism to metamodernism (post-secularism), contributes to the continuous changes in our societies, which undoubtedly lead to changes in the area of religion, in particular the Christian religion. This has resulted in a dichotomy – on the one hand we have religious diversity and decay, and on the other hand church growth and an increasing interest in Christian spirituality, depending on which part of the world is focussed. In order to address these changes from a Christian perspective, biblical hermeneutics has to be amended to make the Christian *kerugma* in a post-secular age more relevant, and to make Christian *living* in a post-secular age viable. In order to proclaim the gospel in a post-secular age, Christian believers will have to *build friendships*, while the *gospel* should be reformulated and redefined in a *remix idiom*. To succeed in addressing the spiritual needs of Christians and to mobilise them to proclaim the gospel, the church will have to pay much more attention to Christian *spirituality* and the *embodiment* of the kingdom of God (and the divine self) in the lives of believers and in the world.

Keywords: secular age, Kearney, Taylor, spirituality, demythologizing, embodiment, friendship

1. Introduction and problem statement

Over the past decades, spectra of dynamic paradoxes have emerged. On the one hand there are voices articulating the globalisation of the world.² Scholte (2000:46–56; also Jacobs 2014:29)³ refers to a range of *trans-world activities* that create trans-world social space: *communication technologies* facilitate a wide variety of supra-territorial connections via telecommunications, the internet and mass media. *Socio-economical* connections operate through global markets (currencies). *Physical production* means that global factories operate with international production chains. Kearney (2010) advocates a new and globalised form of religiosity which he charac-

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² Globalisation also occurred during the Greco-Roman world in the form of Hellenisation.

³ Cf. also the work of Stackhouse (2000, 2001, 2001); Robertson (1992, 2000); Scholte (2000); and Rieger (2010) on globalisation.

terises as “Anatheism”. On the other hand we live in a western/ised⁴ age where “diversity” has also become a popular topic in the political and religious arenas.⁵ Africa, for instance, struggles to retain its indigenous identity separate from Western cultures.

Another paradox, especially within Christianity, is the phenomenon of decay and diversity versus church growth and interest in spirituality elsewhere. On the one hand, in the case of decay, there are Christians who feel that the church no longer addresses their needs and spiritualities and that the message of the church is too archaic. Other contributing factors are the many negative and destructive publications about the person (identity) of Jesus Christ⁶ and *The Jesus Seminar* during 1985.⁷ Of those who leave the main churches, some become atheists, agnostics or a-religious. On the other hand many other Christians will make an effort to become more spiritual or will found new churches. Africa is the continent in which church growth is the strongest/healthiest⁸ and where Pentecostalism is flourishing.⁹

⁴ Cf. the works of Bischof & Pelinka (2009) and Stephan (2006).

⁵ See also Koenig & De Guchteneire (2014:12–14), *Secularism and religious diversity*.

⁶ *The Passover Plot*, 2005, by H.J. Schonfield; *The Jesus Scroll*, 1972 by D. Joyce; *The Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, 1996, by M. Baigent, R. Leigh, H. Lincoln; *Jesus The Man*, 1992, by B. Thiering; *The Woman With The Alabaster Jar*, 1993, by M. Starbird; *The Da Vinci Code*, 2003, by D. Brown and *The Cross Bones*, 2005, by K. Reichs.

⁷ According to Johnson (1996:6), “The agenda of the Seminar is not disinterested scholarship, but a social mission against the way the church is dominated by evangelical theology, that is, a theology focused on the literal truth of the Gospels. It is important to note from the start that Robert Funk does not conceive of the Seminar’s work as making a contribution to scholarship but as carrying out a cultural mission. The Seminar’s declared enemies are not simply fundamentalists or the Southern Baptist Convention, but all those who subscribe to any traditional understanding of Jesus as Risen Lord and Son of God.”

⁸ Cf. *The Explosion of Christianity in Africa*, Available at: <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/2001-now/the-explosion-of-christianity-in-africa-11630859.html>, Retrieved: 11/02/2015. CBN news, 2009. *Africa Leads the World in Growth of Christianity*. Available at: <http://blogs.cbn.com/africamatters/archive/2009/07/20/africa-leads-the-world-in-growth-of-christianity.aspx>, Retrieved: 11/02/2015. Also cf. Kenneth Chan, *Fastest growth of Christianity in Africa*, in *Christian Post World*. Available at: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/fastest-growth-of-christianity-in-africa-260/>, Retrieved: 11/02/2015.

⁹ According to Anderson from the Centre for Missiology and World Christianity, “The role of a new and rapidly growing form of African Christianity, newer Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, is increasingly being recognized. This movement, which has only emerged since 1970, is fast becoming one of the most significant expressions of Christianity on the continent, especially in Africa’s cities. We cannot understand African Christianity today without also understanding this latest movement of revival and renewal.” Available at: http://www.artsweb.bham.ac.uk/aanderson/publications/evangelism_and_the_growth_of_pen.htm, Retrieved 12/02/2015. According to PEW Research Centre (2006) “Pentecostalism has become an increasingly prominent feature of Africa’s religious and political landscape. The movement’s growth has been particularly dramatic since the era of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s”. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/overview-pentecostalism-in-africa/>, Retrieved: 12/02/2015. Also cf. Overview: Pentecostalism in Africa. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/overview-pentecostalism-in-africa/>. See also <https://discipleallnations.wordpress.com/2013/08/25/the-top-20-countries-where-christianity-is-growing-the-fastest/>. Both retrieved 13/02/2015. See also Danfulani (2012:41–43)

In some countries¹⁰ there is more religious tolerance and freedom today than there was three or four decades ago. In other countries there is more radical persecution of Christians¹¹ (also cf. Van der Merwe 2005:330).

The secularising effect of the inevitable development of globalisation forces the religious facet of the third millennium to keenly reconsider its assumed position in the world. Can religion still be significant today? Has Christianity still a missionary function (cf. Jacobs 2014:8)? What does religion, especially Christianity, offer for spiritual living (values, ethics, spirituality, justice) as well as the *kerugma* (mission) in a post-secular age?

This essay begins with a brief evaluation of two different, though related, proposals which endeavour to address spiritual living in an age of secularism and religious diversity. This evaluation endeavours to portray the global environment in which we find ourselves. Then from a Christian perspective, I will render a few amendments to biblical hermeneutics – on how to make the *kerugma* in a post-secular age more relevant and living in a post-secular age viable. These amendments relate to the various relationships between the “I – God – other” and try to cast some light on the *kerugma* and spiritual living today in a post-secular¹² age.

2. Two different proposals about living in a secular age

As pointed out briefly, some developments, currently labelled as globalisation, secularism, religious diversity and religious persecution, confront the church with direct challenges. The task is to react to the current crisis with informed and sustainable solutions that will both resonate with humanity and remain collaborative with Scripture (Jacobs 2014:10). In this attempt, searching for an answer and so-

¹⁰ Consider those not listed in the internet references referred to in footnote 11.

¹¹ See the article of Paul Vallely (on Sunday 27 July 2014) titled *Christians: the world's most persecuted people*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-people-9630774.html> (Retrieved 30/09/2014). “The most violent anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century saw as many as 500 Christians hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals in Orissa, India, with thousands more injured and 50,000 made homeless. In Burma, Chin and Karen Christians are routinely subjected to imprisonment, torture, forced labour and murder. Persecution is increasing in China; and in North Korea a quarter of the Christians live in forced labour camps after refusing to join the national cult of the state's founder, Kim Il-Sung. Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Maldives all feature in the 10 worst places to be a Christian.” See also the International Religious Freedom Report for 2013. Available at: http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religious_freedom/index.htm#wrapper, Retrieved 12/02/2015.

¹² Caputo (2008:46) explains that from the breakup of secularism the rising of a renewed sense of religion or the religious, and of theology and the theological, is to occur, one that is still trying to find its legs. This occurrence is still nameless. It seems obvious that any such renewed sense of religion would be called the “post-secular”. It comes “after secularism”, in the sense that it succeeds historically and supersedes theoretically the regime of secularism. Just bear in mind that this “post-” is passing through and building upon what has been learned from the Enlightenment.

lution to grapple with these issues, this essay firstly proposes two related, though different, approaches that attempt to address these issues.

3. A Secular age – Charles Taylor

In his book *A secular age* (2007), Taylor explores the religious, in particular the Christian, character of the present age and various options of “belief” available to believers and non-believers in this particular time. Skilfully, he provides a narrative of how these options arose and developed over a period of five centuries to the present. He also examines the challenges they face and the dialectical ways in which these options are related to their cultural and political contexts, the needs of people and values, and one another (Morgan 2008).

Although the book is divided into five parts (20 chapters) Morgan (2008)¹³ thinks that the book can best be understood as having two parts, “a diachronic or narrative one and a dialectical or synchronic one”. In the first four parts Taylor charts the historical development of the main option that makes today’s secular age possible. He calls this option “exclusive humanism”, which describes its diverse legacy from the 19th century up to today. The first four parts (chs. 1–14) tell the story of how this question is derived: “Why is it so hard to believe in God in the modern West, when in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to believe?” (2007:539).

In part five (chs. 15–20), Taylor uses these results in order to explore several current options of belief and unbelief in their interrelations, especially with regard to how they deal with “suffering and evil, the bodily and the sexual, violence and destruction, the mundane and the variety of ordinary life”. This last part clarifies the “spiritual shape of the present age”. Morgan (2008) points out that Taylor draws upon the terminology, conceptual apparatus and results of the earlier chapters in order to conduct a kind of structural-dialectical analysis of the complexity of the current age.

For Taylor (2007) the 19th and 20th centuries were periods of instability and uncertainty, and were experienced as unsatisfactory and generally meaningless. He investigates the many dimensions of these changes and the propagation of modes of unbelief and responses to them in the 19th century: the literary figures, artists and poets whose work articulates the unsteadiness and despair that control the age. It is a time of unbelief for some; for others, a time of wonder, play, mystery and even horror (Taylor 2007:374–376). This period provides for the present secular period various possibilities for belief and the shaping or not shaping of this world (Morgan 2008).

According to Taylor, the past 50 years should not be regarded as a time of collapse of a sense of the sacred. He acknowledges the development of new forms of

¹³ In this discussion of *A Secular Age* I rely especially on Morgan’s excellent review (2008). See also Smith’s (2014) brilliant discussion of (response to) *A Secular Age*, *How (not) to be secular reading Charles Taylor*.

spirituality, setting new senses of the sacred in new languages (Taylor 2007:507). New struggles emerged for wholeness and spiritual health, new paths for “fullness” (Morgan 2008). What characterises the spiritual landscape today is great diversity and the increase of middle ways in the continuum, of ways of unbelief on the one side and ways of belief on the other. Taylor argues that the prominent feature of Western societies is not a decline in religious belief and practice; it is rather the plurality of ways of belief and unbelief and also their fragile or temporary status. For him the world today is a world of “cross pressures”. In this world the old beliefs and views are destabilised. New ones are formed, in particular in cases where middle positions take shape or are transformed (Taylor 2007:595).

Taylor makes an invaluable point about what disappeared and what remained. Important to him is the commitment to traditional belief and practice, not the religious motivation. Religious aspiration and its prominence still exist but a decline occurs in the unchallengeable status of belief (op.cit.:530). Today is a new age of religious searching, a time in which morality appears to be a matter of utility, rationality and freedom. Therefore, it may be difficult in a secular age to comprehend why it is necessary to ground morality in divine transcendence (op.cit.:591–592).

Taylor continues to express the need for a “new, more nuanced map of the ideological terrain” (op.cit.:626). It should be a project organised around the “maximal demand,” to examine “how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity” (op.cit.:639–640). According to Taylor the ultimate ground of this demand is the aspiration to wholeness. Taylor frequently refers to it as experiencing “fullness”. It is in the experience of such fullness that the character of the ideals of an age is revealed, as well as the capacity of the ideals to inspire and empower a person. For Taylor, “fullness” characterises a momentary experience in which what counts most about a way of life and a conception of what matters in life is conveyed to the agent in a particularly complete and perfect way (op.cit.:600–601). Hence, for believers, Taylor says, fullness is objective, it is experienced as received. For non-believers, especially after the 18th century, fullness is subjective and is experienced as grounded or empowered by something that lies within them. This can consist of reason or certain forms of desire (op.cit.:9).

Taylor claims that this “fullness” is central to a Christianity whose central declaration is the Incarnation of the divine in the human. “Moreover, embedded in the belief in the Incarnation *is a commitment to the union of the sacred and the profane, the infinite and the finite*, that does show how profound Christian Taylor’s analysis is” (Morgan 2008). According to Taylor Christianity is a living tradition. It changes and adapts in each new age. Christianity has to be faithful to the tradition, and not to the past (Taylor 2007:749).

4. Anatheism: returning to God after God – Richard Kearney

In 2010 Richard Kearney¹⁴ published his book *Anatheism: returning to God after God*.¹⁵ With this neologism, “anatheism” (*Ana-theos*, Kearney 2010:5), Kearney introduces “a fresh attempt to reconceive the possibility of the sacred for the 21st century, seeking a way ... of ‘returning to God after God’” (Burkey 2010:160).¹⁶ Anatheism relies on the life of faith in the secular era. Kearney (2010) tries to find the sacred in the secular. He sees the virtue of hospitality as valuable and necessary in this regard (cf. Caputo 2010:back cover page).

Kearney (op.cit.:3) extends anatheism as a third alternative to the “polar opposites” of “dogmatic theism and militant atheism”. Anatheism does not offer a dialectical synthesis of the theism-atheism opposition (cf. op.cit.:6; Burkey 2010:160). “As the prefix *ana* suggests, anatheism is about repetition and return.”¹⁷ ... It is concerned with a ‘repetition’ *forward*” (op.cit.:6–7). Kearney describes it as “another way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove”, or “Another idiom for receiving back what we’ve given up as if we were encountering it for the first time. ... In short, another way of returning to a God beyond or beneath the God we thought we possessed” (op.cit.:3).

Kearney presents this concept of “anatheism” in three stages or moments, which he names “the iconoclastic” (the tradition), “the prophetic”, and “the sacramental”. The *first stage* accepts the “NO” to the God of ontotheology. In approaching tradition as text, Kearney examines how theologies of divine providence are problematic after the historical nightmare of Auschwitz, which he claims reduces the concept of “divine plan” to merely a “cruel sham” (op.cit.:58). In place of a God of infinite power, Kearney advocates a God of “radical powerlessness” (op.cit.:58–71). Thus “God can be only if we let God be God” (op.cit.:59).

In the *second stage* Kearney gathers prophetic voices. Some of these voices wrote directly out of a prison camp experience of the Holocaust (Hilsum, Bonhoeffer, Ricœur) or from that discourse (Arendt, Rabbi Greenberg, Levinas, Derrida). The voices of these people are attuned to the absence of God in the midst of suffering and pain. For Kearney it reflects the weakness, powerlessness and indeed the suffering of God. Kearney interprets this to mean that the powerful and saving God is absent. The only way for God to occur is that “we” have to host “Him”, save “Him”

¹⁴ Kearney holds the Charles H. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College.

¹⁵ Among his most important titles are *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (1995); *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (2001); *On Stories* (2002); and *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (2003). *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2010) is his latest book.

¹⁶ In my overview of Kearney I rely strongly on the reviews of Kennedy (2011) and Burkey (2010).

¹⁷ Also “to return to faith anew (*ana*)” (2010:170).

(Burkey 2010:162). Kearney (2010:63) writes, “The felt absence of the old God (the death of God) ushers in a sense of emptiness that may provoke a new desire, a seasoned desire for the return of the Other God – the divine guest who brings life”. For Kearney the identity of this God is not the God of omnipotence but a God of service and a sacramental “yes” to life (Burkey 2010:162).

The second half of the book (*Interlude* and *Postlude*) postulates the *third stage* of anatheism: “sacramental transformations in the everyday” (op.cit.:162). This occurs mostly in secular scenes: in particular, in situations of lived experiences (op.cit.:88–100), literary imagination (op.cit.:101–21), and ethical-political praxis (op.cit.:154–165). For Kearney an ethical encounter enjoys primarily ontological priority. This book is about “how the-god-who-may-be might be manifest”. The core of this book is “the encounter with the Stranger and the event of hospitality/hostility” (cf. 170). While official theologies and popular religious imagination typically emphasise the loci¹⁸ of “creation, salvation, miracles, power or final judgment as inaugural persuasion of faith, Kearney focuses on the neglected figure of the Stranger” (op.cit.:161).

At the beginning of the third stage (ch. 6), Kearney’s primary question becomes “how do anatheists in a secular age respond to the question: what is to be done?” (Kearney 2010:133). The solution he offers moves “towards an ethics of kenosis” (op.cit.:133–36) or “self-emptying”, which points towards “emancipatory action” (op.cit.:134–35). To demonstrate this end, Kearney provides models for mimetic co-option (op.cit.:154–165). He demonstrates how the lives of Doris Day, Jean Vanier and Mohandas Gandhi epitomise the sacramental. Kearney recognises Day for exemplifying the oppressed urban poor, Vanier the disabled and wounded, and Gandhi the colonised and oppressed of India.¹⁹ Kearney tries to show that these are exemplars of the restoration of the bond between the sacred and secular. Their lives testify “to the incarnation of divinity in the flesh of the world” (op.cit.:165). In fact, Kearney calls for recognition of the “embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, and of eschatology in the now” (Kearney 2010:166; Kennedy 2011).

5. Conclusion

In the work of these two exponents there are points of critique with regard to content, interpretation and reasoning, although there are also *principles*²⁰ of agreement. The one outstanding point in the work of Taylor is his statement about the plurality of ways of belief and unbelief and also their fragile or temporary status. We live in an age to which he refers as having “cross pressures”. In this age the old beliefs and views are

¹⁸ Kearney refers to the loci as stories (Burkey 2010:161).

¹⁹ By referring to and briefly discussing these exponents (Day, Vanier, Gandhi), Kearney tries to substitute Jesus who is presented in the Gospels (actually the NT) as mimetic co-option.

²⁰ Bear in mind that a principle can be fed with new or different content.

destabilised while new ones are formed, and in particular where middle positions take shape or are transformed (Taylor 2007:595).²¹ These points of view of Taylor are important and valid, though a distinction should be made between *central* and *peripheral* truths. It is true that culturally and the ancient world image related expressions in the Bible shall have to be reinterpreted and consequently be redefined and that central truths shall have to remain unchanged.²² Unfortunately is a shortcoming of Taylor's work that he does not provide any direct existential solution to the issue of living spiritually in a secular age (cf. Colorado 2007:13).

In the work of Kearney there are two relevant vantage points. Although interpreted differently, the principles are valid: (1) to return to God after God, (2) to experience the "Other" in "other". Firstly, the church can no longer think and believe in God from the perspective of the ancient world-view (also pointed out by Taylor). The church has to believe, interpret and understand God from a contemporary cosmological-soteriological perspective. Secondly, the church has to review and reconsider the example (ὑπόδειγμα) set by Jesus in John 13 regarding their *modus operandi* in the proclamation of the *gospel*. The world has to hear and has to find the "Other" in the "other" through friendships.²³ A serious problem in the work of Kearney is how he comprehends God as the "Other", a vague God without an identity, a "may be". Which monotheistic religion²⁴ will buy in to this?²⁵

The work of Taylor and Kearney portray the real situation and age in which the world finds itself. They help us to look at the influence of secularism on religion. Both tried to present solutions how to get the religious discourse to move on but unfortunately did not solve the problem. The following section will attend to how the *gospel* can still be proclaimed effectively in a post secular age and also how Christian ling is viable.

6. Rethinking biblical hermeneutics for mobilizing Christian believers to proclaim the Good News in a post-secular age²⁶

6.1 Living spiritually in different relationships

Relationships are part of being human. Being human is to be involved in relationships. Therefore, this essay follows a holistic approach in the amendment of some

²¹ Again we can't generalise these phenomena as worldwide phenomena.

²² For verification, see my discussion later under the heading "Relationship with God: remix idiom" as well as Heyns (1974:170).

²³ This implies more than the proposed "hospitality" of Kearney or the "fullness" of Taylor.

²⁴ Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

²⁵ Kearney certainly has the gift of playing with words, phrases, concepts, or just thoughts. This can be seen in his latest book, *Anatheism: returning to God after God*. I find it difficult to agree with Kearney's facile arguments and reasoning to break down the ontological or metaphysical understanding of God.

²⁶ In this essay "hermeneutics" is interpreted not only as connected with literary texts, though also with the way of living.

applicable hermeneutical principles.²⁷ Believers stand in three different and basic personal relationships: to themselves (I), to God and to others.²⁸ For this reason, *Christian living* and the proclamation of the *gospel* (mission) in a post secular age, should be approached by considering all three of these personal relationships as equally important.

Diagram 1 refers to some hermeneutical amendments which relate closely to the abovementioned relationships. The rest of the essay will attend to these amendments and relationships.

6.2 Relationship with God: remix idiom

This subsection deals with the relationship between God and people: One critical reason why many people leave the church is because they can no longer accept the idiom in which the gospel is communicated. For them the archaic world-view as a three-storied structure²⁹ clashes with modern physics and cosmology. An ontological review of God is needed regarding the being and involvement of this divine being in his creation in a post-secular age. Even the “word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18)³⁰ is, according to Paul, a “stumbling-block” (Gal. 5:11) to the natural man, or “a stumbling block ... and foolishness ...” (1 Cor. 1:23) (Bultmann 1968:I, 293).

Nothing can be more obvious to both the practised historian and the casual reader of the New Testament today than the fact that the culturally influenced thought-forms, terminology and world-view of the early 1st century are profoundly different from the cultural thought-forms, terminology and world-view of the 21st century. In order for the *kerugma* to make sense for post-modern people, the mythological imagery of the gospel message,³¹ as Bultmann calls it, of the 1st century must be rephrased (Stuart 1958:133) and explained within the idiom of a post-secular age.

Considering this, the demythologising of Bultmann makes sense as do the “anatheism” principle of Kearney and related statements by Taylor. Thus the *gospel* has to be communicated in a remix idiom and still remain true to the fundamental message of Scripture and principles stated in Scripture.³²

²⁷ In this essay I understand “hermeneutics” not only as the science of interpretation, especially of the Scriptures, but also in a wider context as “The study of the way in which we interpret and attempt to understand phenomena such as texts, ... actions, and gestures”. Available at: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hermeneutics>, Retrieved: 13/02/2015.

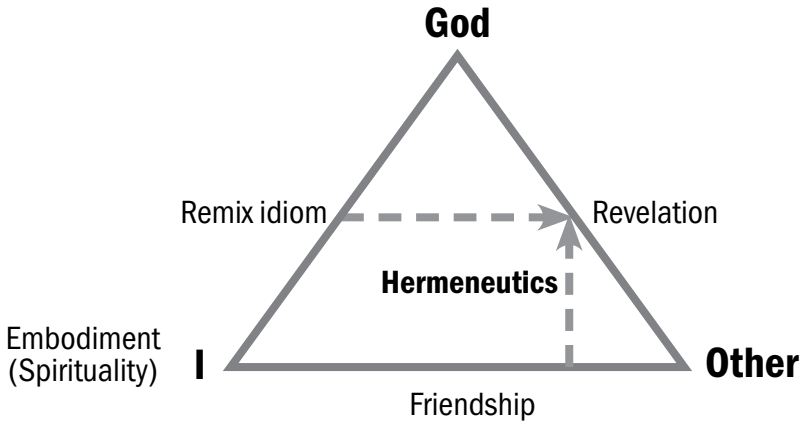
²⁸ A fourth relationship, namely the created world, forms a fourth relationship.

²⁹ The earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath.

³⁰ As well as the resurrection.

³¹ For Bultmann (1972:1) “Mythology is the use of imagery to express the otherworldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side”.

³² Physics was the main cause of the move from modernism to postmodernism, especially the contributions of Newton and Einstein (Voelz 2000:10).



Although this author does not agree with everything Bultmann, Kearney or Taylor have said about God or the demythologising of the gospel, he wants to use Bultmann's principle of demythologising as a hermeneutical tool to address the issue of the relevance of the gospel in a post-secular age (see Stuart 1958:132). Demythologising asks: "Does the biblical mythology contain a new conception of our situation before God?" Demythologising does not seek to set this aspect of myth aside or eliminate it. Rather, demythologising seeks to interpret, even in some cases to reinterpret, aspects of mythological statements as we find them in the New Testament *kerygma* (cf. Stuart 1958:134). In other words, it means to confront the metamodern scientific person with the decisive act of God in Christ, in a metamodern idiom that will still do justice and respect the early 1st-century theology.

This means confronting each New Testament event, principle and doctrine with (cf. Stuart 1958:134) existential and spiritual questions: "What is the meaning of this event, principle or doctrine for my existence, experience and understanding of the resurrected Christ and the trinity in this secular age"? Voelz (2000:312), in his discussion on *Reading scripture in the post-modern era*, verifies this point from another perspective. He makes two important statements: (1) that "All discourse is situated or contextualised (as are the data of the reality which it seeks to reflect) which means that there is no discourse which is a non-context-bound description of reality and, therefore, immediately transferable to all other contexts."³³ (2) "All

³³ According to Voelz (2000:312) synchronic usage is a basis for textual discourse. "Words are used with the meanings that are contextualised temporally (they are appropriate to their time), contextualised socially and culturally (they reflect the social/cultural setting of their users), and contextualised literarily (they are dependent on their literary co-text)".

discourse is perspective and partial; it does not convey an easy, comprehensive message and therefore an easy comprehensive picture of reality” (Voelz 2000:321).³⁴

How should, or rather must, this issue then be addressed practically? Heyns offers a possible solution. According to him (1974:172) there are two kinds³⁵ of truth in Scripture: central³⁶ and peripheral³⁷. If peripheral truth is treated as central truth or central as peripheral truth, then the revelation of Scripture is mutilated.³⁸

Of course the Bible writers were without microscopes, telescopes, electricity, radio-activity, computers, etc. Without all this they looked at their world. Their insight was independent of a systematic and ordered knowledge of physics and technical science. Reality, as the Bible writers experienced it, was formulated by them in the idiom of transcendence versus immanence. Thus the revelation of God did not *completely* come to humans in timeless or eternal truths as free-standing ideas or thought systems (Heyns 1974:173). This implies that central truths should be respected while peripheral truths be reconsidered and reinterpreted according to the principles embedded in these truths.

6.3 Relationship with other: friendship

This subsection deals with the essence of human relationships, namely, friendship. Part of the success of Christian living and the powerful proclamation of the *gospel* in a post-secular age lies in the unity of the church (Jn 17:20–23) and is embedded in the example (ὑπόδειγμα, Jn 13:15) which Jesus sets for His disciples when He washes their feet.³⁹

³⁴ See also Arles (2014:17) on the “Way forward in making a relevant theology”.

³⁵ Voelz (2000:313) quotes Dawn (1992:6) who suggests three kinds of text in the Bible:

(A) Normative or Instructive Texts – those which give basic, fundamental principles that should characterise the people of God; (B) Descriptive Texts – those which narrate examples of practices acceptable among the people of God; (C) Problematic or Corrective Texts – those which deal with specific problems among the Jews or in the early Church.

³⁶ Heyns (1974:170) defines “central” as the centre where things converge, on which attention is focused, the key which unlocks every word, text or book in the Bible. Central truth expresses the truth that scripture emanated organically from a life-core. These truths cannot be changed.

³⁷ For Heyns (1974:170) not everything in scripture is equally distanced from the centre. There is a periphery which is further from the centre, but which still belongs to the circle of the thoughts of God. These truths are mostly culturally bound. They refer to the context of the ancient world. They should not easily be neglected, though the principles embedded in these truths are still applicable for believers today.

³⁸ Bear in mind that everything in Scripture relates to the central truth, therefore everything in Scripture has sense and meaning. The idea of “central” emphasises the organic character of Scripture (Heyns 1974:172).

³⁹ In this part of the essay I am very much influenced by my inaugural lecture on 13 August 2013 entitled *The sense of “unity” in the Gospel of John: Practice in Christian Spirituality*.

This activity is without doubt an act that reveals the true meaning of the love of Jesus for His disciples. He fulfils his mission in bringing to completion the boundless love of God for the world (Schneiders 2003:189). He is going to be crucified ... and to be resurrected. Both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus add significance and meaning to such love and service.

What is happening here is that the death of Jesus should mean for them an act of ultimate service, a complete rejection of the norms of the world and the conferring of a new set of values.⁴⁰ These different values would be outstanding and sensible in the world and complementary to the proclamation of the *gospel*. These values encompass the disciples serving one another even to the point of laying down their lives, as Jesus did (Culpepper 1991:142). This functions as catechesis of the approaching death of Jesus – He is handing himself over for and to His disciples. In this foot washing Jesus is presented as servant. This “symbolically characterizes his impending suffering and death as a work of service” (Schneiders 2003:189).⁴¹

Service is normally understood quite univocally as something that one person does for the sake of fostering the good of the other. In the most extreme form it consists of the server laying down his or her life for the sake of the one served. To lay down one’s life is the ultimate preferring of the good of another to one’s own. Service is capable of expressing ultimate love, and the love commanded by Jesus has the inner form of service. Every act of service, no matter how ordinary, because it consists in preferring another to oneself, is basically an act of self-giving. It is an expression of love, which in principle tends toward the total of self-giving (op. cit.:192).

Jesus’ apophthegm to “lay down one’s life for a friend” has precedence in antiquity as a model for the ultimate friend (Köstenberger 2004:458). The possibility of laying down one’s life belonged to the ancient rhetoric of friendship (O’Day 2004:148). Jesus did what ancient philosophers only talked about. In washing the disciples’ feet Jesus acted to abolish the inequality between Him and His disciples, deliberately reversing their social positions and roles. “He established an intimacy with them that superseded his superiority and signalled their access to everything that he had received from his Father” (see Jn 15:15; Schneiders 2003:195).

Through friendship the revelation of God through Jesus is extended beyond the work of Jesus to the work of the disciples. The friendship of the disciples with Jesus results in their obedience to his commandments (Varghese 2009:363). What happens here is that God works through people with other people. Through people who live in a close relationship with God, He becomes a reality (a lived experience)

⁴⁰ This relates in a sense to Kearney’s idea of “hospitality” and Taylor’s idea of “fullness”.

⁴¹ The original meaning of the Johannine foot washing was to provide a lesson in humility and mutual service (Knox 1950:162).

for those who make contact with these people, i.e. Jesus and later disciples (Van der Merwe 2002:243). According to John 17:21, 23 is such unity among the followers of Jesus a powerful communication of the *gospel*. According to these verses will the world believe (also know) that God has sent his Son into the world.

A healthy friendship makes participants in relationships equal and constitutes unity among friends. It opens possibilities of communicating the *gospel* to a world entangled in post-secularism.

6.4 Relationship with self: embodiment & spirituality

It is one thing to talk about *Christian living* and *proclaiming the gospel*. It is another thing to accomplish it. This section explains how it is possible, even today.

6.4.1 Embodiment and spirituality

The interpretation of Scripture should never stop at merely the explication of the biblical text or even its application. Exegesis and interpretation (hermeneutical process) end only when the embodiment of analysed texts has taken place in the lives of believers and the Christian principles embedded in texts become a *way of living*. The actualising of the embodiment of texts (and God in this world) can be assisted when “lived experiences” ensue in the reading of biblical texts. *Interpretation* must become an *explication*, then an *application* which must consequently become an *embodiment of the text* to result in a *new way of life* and consequently result in the proclamation of the *gospel*.⁴² The *spiritualities* (lived experiences) generated by *intersecting* with the text through contemplative reading should function as catalysts for the *embodiment* of texts as the culmination of the hermeneutical spiral. These two textures (embodiment and spirituality) in the hermeneutical process will support believers to form new friendships through which God will be revealed and the *gospel* be proclaimed in a new idiom.

6.4.2 The dynamics of the texture of embodiment⁴³

Contemporary studies of Scripture has witnessed a “shift from a mechanistic to a holistic paradigm, enabling the text to come to life as transformative and life-changing, and this has contributed to the rediscovery of the text as dynamic medium rather than static object” (Kourie 2011:134). The response of an interpreter is finally not only a matter of reading the bible text but of being. Biblical interpretation

⁴² Köstenberger and Deppe are the only two to refer explicitly to “application” or “personalising” of the text.

⁴³ A thorough discussion of this section occurs in my publication “Reading the Bible in the twenty-first century: some hermeneutical principles” in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 2015.

should end in the embodiment of the text (and the embodiment of God)⁴⁴ in the life of the believer and the embodiment of God in the world. The way of living of the interpreter displays his or her interpretation of the texts he or she has read. Thus the church is a living commentary of Scripture (Vanhoozer 1998:440–41). According to Ricoeur there are two phases in the process of reading: (1) the moment at which the meaning of the text is explained; and (2) “the moment at which the reader recaptures the meaning and gives shape to it in its own existence” (Ricoeur 1991:57). Ricoeur calls this application the understanding of the significance. “Significance is the moment when the reader takes over the meaning, that is to say: activation of the meaning in the existence of the reader” (Ricoeur 1973:194).⁴⁵ For the reader significance is appropriation, which comprises the culmination of the interpretation of a text in the self-interpretation of a subject. Appropriation then coincides with identity formation. To interpret is to follow the past of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* to the orientation of the text. Then interpretation “is to appropriate *here and now* the intention of the text” (Ricoeur 1991:118, 121–22). Understanding a text implies that the reader is transformed⁴⁶ by the text (Boff 1987:137; cf. also Waaijman 2002:768). Appropriation is a process and certainly not a single event (Henrischen & Jackson 1990:271). The hermeneutical process is only complete when the embodiment of the text investigated is realised in the life of the reader/hearer and consequently becomes a new way of life.

On the other hand the existence of God and His characteristics should also become evident. This is what Jesus proved to His disciples. The embodiment of God takes shape in this world when people live according to the principles in Scripture, e.g. to love one another so much that they will lay down their lives for one another. The author of First John is interested in the obligation to love one another, for it is the sign that God lives in the believer. Therefore he says: “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us” (1 Jn 4:12). The author’s point here is that while no one can claim to have seen God (apart from God’s one and only Son, *μονογενής*) believers who love one another demonstrate that the unseen God lives in them.⁴⁷ Unity among believers will be a testimony to the world that God has sent His Son into the world (see Jn 17:20–23). This actually means that the circuit of God’s love is completed when believers love one another (Kruse 2000:162–63).

⁴⁴ See the analysis of Van der Merwe (2002: 222–252) on the unity in John 17:20–23 and 15:1–9.

⁴⁵ For Schneiders (1991:177), “Transformative interpretation ... is not blind submission to the text as answer but an in-depth engagement of the subject matter, of its truth claims”.

⁴⁶ See Schneiders (2002:137–140) for a discussion of “Transforming reading of Scripture”.

⁴⁷ Strecker (1996:157) says: “Since God, as the invisible one, is unapproachable, escape into a direct vision of God is closed to the Christian community. The encounter with God that is promised to them takes place, instead, here and now in the love for one another.”

6.4.3 The dynamics of the texture of spirituality as embedded in the text

In the 21st century the Spirit of God still provides wisdom to spiritual persons. To obtain such wisdom, continuous contemplative reading and imaginative exegesis⁴⁸ of Scripture is needed. Such reading and exegesis and their discernment of the wisdom of God will create within them spiritualities of transformative existential encounters⁴⁹ of the content of the text and the divine. This will both motivate and urge believers to share the good news, to become involved in mission.

The believes and “lived experiences” of the authors in the 1st century C.E. create through their texts new spiritualities⁵⁰ in the lives of not only the first readers of the text but also spiritual people today when they study Scripture. Therefore, the embodiment of both the principles in Scripture and of God⁵¹ in the lives of believers and the embodiment of God in the world are prompted through these “lived experiences” (spiritualities) embedded in the texts. These “lived experiences” assist the embodiment process, already referred to, which will consequently result in an urge to share the *gospel* with other. Christianity will then keep on remaining a dynamic force that will endure during the post-secular age and will continue to change the world.

7. Conclusion – a revelation to the world

This essay tends to reflect on how the God who has become a Stranger or even non-existent to many believers in a secularised age (according to Kearney and also Taylor) can again be welcomed (revealed) today via witnessing (experience), confessing (doctrine) and ethics (conduct). The essay advocates a form of theism to rediscover the “powerless” sacred in the midst of a self-assured post-secular age (cf. Masterson 2010:cover).

Living spiritually as a Christian in a post-secular age and the proclaiming of the *gospel* is challenging and requires some hermeneutical amendments. These amendments relate to the different relationships in which believers stand. If the missionary church still wants to make an impact in and on the world it has to re-view its doctrine and message about the “Kingdom of God” and redefine peripheral truths within the confines and idioms of its time, but still remain true to the central truths and fundamental message of Scripture and principles stated in Scripture. This *gospel* must then be communicated to the world through the avenues of unity and friendship which should be characterised by love. This is only possible when

⁴⁸ Exegesis can include “Scripture”, “tradition” and “circumstances”.

⁴⁹ See Schneiders (2002:139–141) on *lectio divina*.

⁵⁰ McClendon (2012:207, 221–24) refers to “Biblical Spirituality ... as the basis for shaping one’s understanding of and experience with God”.

⁵¹ Bultmann refers to the “embodiment of God” as the “objectification of God”.

the embodiment of biblical principles is realised in their everyday life due to the “lived experiences” (spiritualities) of the biblical text and the divine.

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